

Lobbying Behaviors of Higher Education Institutions: Structures, Attempts, and Success

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Abstract

As colleges and universities are under increased pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness, leaders have come to rely on government relations personnel to adequately tell the story of the activities and needs of the campus. State governments typically are the largest single supplier of public institution funding, yet they have been challenged by competing priorities to adequately fund all of their needs, particularly higher education. The study explored the activities higher education government relations personnel perceive to be effective in lobbying state legislators. Using a Delphi survey technique, senior government relations officers at land grant universities identified and agreed upon a series of strategies that college and university leaders can use to effectively work with public elected officials, particularly stressing the need for access to campus decision makers and a high level of trust between campus leaders and elected officials. These government relations officers identified a total of 58 strategies for effectively working with elected officials, and the study concludes with the recommendation that these 58 strategies be field tested and validated prior to use.

Public higher education institutions have historically relied on state legislatures to provide the funding necessary for their operation, and state funding is typically the largest single component of a college's budget (Alexander, 2003; Cross, 2004). During the past three decades, state funding has decreased to account for an historic low level of funding for institutions (Brumfield, 2007). Despite this decrease in funding, public support of higher education remains strong and demand for higher education services have been continuously stable.

In addition to funding colleges and universities, states governments have been challenged to support a variety of public works programs, ranging from prisons and correctional facilities, to matching federal funding for medical programs (Quinlan, 2005). Coupled with a heightened public awareness of public K-12 education and a centralization of funding community colleges, competition for state resources has reached an all-time high (Brumfield, 2007).

Many colleges and universities have responded to the competition for state funding by hiring lobbyists or similar government relations officers who have the ability to learn about legislative interests and to match those motivations with opportunities within institutions. On the most basic level, institutional lobbying explores matching common interests with funding or resource distribution.

Structures for institutional lobbying vary dramatically by state, institution, and region. Some institutions employ large staffs of legislative relations officers, and others rely on massive networks of alumni to mobilize on different legislative issues. With a lack of literature and comprehensive understanding, the current study was designed to

explore what government relations officers believe to be the elements that make higher education government relations programs successful. As a descriptive, exploratory study, findings were identified to be important to both higher education leaders and researchers who are concerned with the processes used to educate the broader public, and legislators in particular, about the practice and potential of higher education.

Background of the Study

With the establishment of higher education in the United States, state-level funding competition has been a standard element of higher education activity (Brumfield, 2007). Colleges and universities have typically had to compete not only with other colleges and universities, but also with public education at the elementary and secondary level, and increasingly, programs that receive federal matching funds (Zhang, 2003). The results have not traditionally favored higher education; in 2003 states spend \$500 billion on public education and \$57 billion on higher education (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2004). This has been partially due to the lucrative nature of federal matches for Medicare and Medicaid, but also because of the legislative perception that institutions can generate their own needed revenue through tuition price setting (Zumeta, 2002).

Colleges and universities face at least two other very real challenges in attempting to gain state support for their operations. The first of these is the broad, and growing, perception that higher education is largely a private good that benefits an individual first and foremost (Malveaux, 2004; Zusman, 2005). This argument suggests that institutions provide an education that benefits the career trajectory and personal finances of individuals, thus providing an argument that state funding of such behavior is not a necessity; simply, those who benefit from a higher education should pay for it. The

second major issue institutions face is related to private funding raising. As institutions complete massive fund raising campaigns, legislators are less likely to provide public funding (Gianneschi, 2004). Despite legislators claiming the opposite effect, that is, rewarding institutions who generate diverse revenue streams, their behaviors suggest that institutions are provided less public funding when their private funding increases.

Brumfield (2007) also noted that college and university leaders have an interest in the behavior and attention that state legislators and officials provide higher education for reasons other than financial support, namely, policy and oversight issues. Brumfield noted that state governing bodies have the ability to create highly complex, or conversely, relatively easy accountability measures and reports. A strong legislative strategy, Brumfield argued, that focuses on the education of public officials is the primary desirable effort to be taken by institutions in working with public officials.

Although there are anecdotal and personal arguments about how higher education should work with state governments (see, for example, Cook, 1998; Harvey & Immerwahr, 1995; Kane, Orszag, & Apostolov, 2005; Malveaux, 2004; and McClendon, Heller, & Young, 2005), there is a lack of research or agreed upon strategies that can help guide colleges and universities in their work with state governments. The foundation of this study, therefore, was created to begin developing consensus from practitioners about the effective processes that can be used by college and university leaders to work with state government officials for the welfare of higher education institutions.

Research Design

As an exploratory study that was designed to develop consensus, a quasi-qualitative research approach was determined to be appropriate. The research design

selected was the Delphi survey technique. This strategy allows for experts from diverse geographic locations to participate, anonymously, in the identification and agreement of items related to the subject of the study (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974; Sackman, 1975; Miles, 1997).

A total of ten senior government relations officers were selected for inclusion in the study. These individuals were identified at public land-grant universities that identified an office and structure for government relations on their institution's internet website. The individuals were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the senior government relations officer was identified, with contact information on the institution's web site, (b) the governmental affairs office was dedicated specifically to an individual campus and not an entire university system, and (c) the office was headed by someone with a vice president or vice chancellor title, reporting directly to the campus' senior executive.

Data were collected using the three-round Delphi survey method in the winter of 2007-2008. All data collection activities were conducted via electronic mail, and as the intent of the study was to describe strategies for effective government relations, attention was directed at having the senior government relations officers complete all three rounds of study rather than focusing on a particular number of participants. The non-response of 50% of the identified participants was noted as a significant limitation of the study, however, this did not impact the overall objective of the study which was to create a listing with some degree of consensus about strategies for colleges and universities to work with state legislatures.

Findings

Five government relations officers completed all five rounds of the Delphi survey. These professionals provided a cumulative mean rating of 3.97 (SD=.57) for the 58 items they identified and rated. The scale used was 5=very strong agreement that the strategy is effective in lobbying state legislators by higher education institutions; 4=agree; 3=neither agree nor disagree with the strategy; 2=disagree that the strategy is effective; and 1=strongly disagree about the strategies effectiveness.

Ratings were unevenly distributed, with 28 strategies being rated 4.2 or higher (see Table 1 for all strategy mean ratings), 16 rated between 3.6 and 4.0, and 14 had an overall mean rating of 3.4 or lower. The one strategy that there was unanimous agreement (mean 5.0) about was that an organizational structure must be in place that permits access to the university president (or chancellor). The next six highest rated strategies had a mean rating of 4.8 and although specifically directed to the situation of governmental lobbying, were framed on basic organizational effectiveness elements, including credibility, trust, guidance, communications, responsiveness, and access to the process. Specifically, government relations officers agreed that there must be creditability on all issues where the university is involved in the legislative process (4.8), have the guidance from the president (or chancellor) (4.8), have the trust of government officials (4.8), have ongoing communication with legislators (4.8), be responsive to legislative questions (4.8), and have an organizational structure that permits access to key campus leaders responsible for external and governmental relations.

Conversely, governmental relations officers neither agreed nor disagreed that an information network consisting of faculty who are willing to pass on items that might or might not garner legislative attention (mean 3.0) would be effective. And, these officers

disagreed that agreements between students of other universities on priorities and goals is effective in lobbying (mean 2.2).

Although there were few themes that crossed over all of the items generated by the government relations officers, trust was mentioned in four separate strategies, and if accountability is deemed similar to trust, then trust was mentioned in five strategies. Additional themes that arose from the responses included a technical knowledge of how the system of politics works, administrative direction for policies, and the importance of relationships among both campus administrators and those on the campus, but also those of position of prominence in the state's decision making process.

Discussion

The study was significantly limited due to the sample size involved in the Delphi survey, however, study findings did reveal an important perspective on the process of government relations and lobbying. Those involved in government relations stressed the need for access to decision-makers on campus, and for to have the trust and credibility to work with elected officials. This is not unique to higher education, and subsequently indicates that (a) higher education may not be substantially different in lobbying and competitive behaviors than other state or public agencies, and (b) higher education leaders need to accept and embrace their role in competing for state resources.

The notion that higher education may or may not be different from other public interests represents a major change in thinking for higher education officials. College and university leaders have historically viewed their roles in state development as unique and adding a value to that the state would not otherwise be able to capitalize upon. However, from the perspective of legislators, colleges and universities may be

depreciating in their value, especially as higher education engages in more insular and engaging in private benefit activities, such as athletics and private sector research and development.

Regarding competitive behavior, college leaders have known for the past 25 years that they must compete for state resources. Despite this knowledge, their protocols and processes have not changed significantly nor have they figured out how to effectively make decisions about campus priorities. Institution lack of flexibility and responsiveness to state and academic needs, for example, reflect an administrative posture that does not embrace the changed landscape of public higher education.

The elements identified in the study should be developed into a survey instrument that is distributed to a wide cast of college officials. Subsequently, the strategies identified in the survey should be field tested with legislators (perhaps first with retired legislators), and should be assembled into a total package and curriculum for college leaders to learn how to more effectively work with their state legislators.

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Table 1.

Strategies for Effective Government Relations Approaches for Higher Education Institutions

Strategy	Mean
Having an organizational structure that permits access to the university president	5.0
Credibility on all issues where the university is involved in the legislative process	4.8
Guidance from the president/chancellor	4.8
Having the trust of government officials	4.8
Ongoing communication with legislators	4.8
Responsiveness to legislative questions	4.8
Having an organizational structure that permits access to key campus leaders responsible for external/governmental relations	4.8
A very good understanding of the state budget process	4.6
Ongoing communication with legislative staff	4.6
Support from the president/chancellor	4.6
A strong understanding of higher education data in your respective state	4.4
Financial accountability	4.4
Financial resources to adequately perform duties	4.4
A government relations staff that gives good direction for internal decisions	4.4

(table continues)

Table 1, continued

Strategy	Mean
Having adroit government relations staff	4.4
Having the trust of government officials is preeminent above all else	4.4
Staff that is well respected by elected officials	4.4
University meets expectations and is perceived well by legislators	4.4
A university's reputation	4.4
A strong understanding of institutional research data	4.2
A very good understanding of state expenditures	4.2
The ability to communicate well across party lines to promote the goals of the higher education institution	4.2
Having the 'home member' on the appropriations/finance committee	4.2
Maximizing connections between legislators and the university	4.2
A personal relationship between local legislator and university president	4.2
Responsiveness to legislative issues	4.2
Timely responses to university crisis and/or Scandals	4.2
Support environment on campus to provide data and analysis which support advocacy programs of the university	4.2

(table continues)
Table 1, continued.

Strategy	Mean
Having citizenry engagement on behalf of the university requests	4.0
Maximizing connections between constituents affiliated with the university	4.0
Ongoing communications with external stakeholders	4.0
Ongoing communications with internal Stakeholders	4.0
Trust between governor and top university Administrators	4.0
Trust between state administrators and top university administrators	4.0
Having university supporters securing key committee appointments	4.0
Uncensored communication with the chief executive officer so that all of an issues nuances can be captured	4.0
Having university supporters in the legislative arena	3.8
Very good understanding of state revenue Procedures	3.6
Cooperation with other campuses	3.6
Knowledgeable professional staff with a background in government affairs	3.6
Sharing with other campuses	3.6

(table continues)

Table 1, continued.

Strategy	Mean
Sufficient university resources	3.6
Active political contributions to key legislators from individuals identified as university supporters	3.4
Knowledge of public policy issues other than higher education	3.4
An information network consisting of alumni who are willing to pass on items that might or might not garner legislative attention	3.4
Coordination with other campuses	3.4
Timely reaction to political events	3.4
An information network consisting of students who are willing to pass on items that might or might not garner legislative attention	3.4
An active political contributions to key legislators from a PAC	3.2
Agreement between other universities	3.2
Frequent contact with interested alumni	3.2
Knowledgeable professional staff with a background in advocacy	3.2
A support and engaged university alumni tradition	3.2
Understanding public policy issues other than higher education	3.2

(table continues)

Table 1, continued.

Strategy	Mean
An information network consisting of faculty who are willing to pass on items that might or might not garner legislative attention	3.0
Agreements between students of other universities on priorities and goals	2.2